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ABSTRACT

Short-term and 1-year effects of the Learn and Serve America program were examined in an evaluation of programs at 17 middle schools and high schools nationwide. The following four data sources were among those analyzed: survey responses and school records of approximately 1,000 Learn and Serve program participants and comparison group members; surveys of teachers at the 17 schools; telephone interviews with staff at participating community agencies; and on-site interviews and observation of program activities. Together, students at the 17 sites participated in more than 300 projects each semester and provided more than 150,000 hours of service during the program year. Although the Learn and Serve programs had a positive short-term effect on participants' civic attitudes and involvement in volunteer service at the end of the program year, they showed little evidence of longer-term impacts at the 1-year follow-up. The effects of service learning on academic performance were significantly greater among nonwhite and educationally disadvantaged participants. Despite strong administrator and teacher support for the program, few sites engaged in organized efforts to expand the use of service learning at either the school or school district levels. On average, program participants produced services valued at nearly four times the program's costs. (MN)

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Summary Report

National Evaluation of Learn and Serve America

ED 437 574

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Summary Report
National Evaluation
of Learn and Serve America
School and Community-
Based Programs

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The Corporation
for National Service

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Waltham, MA
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Photographs courtesy
of the Corporation
for National Service

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This report is the product of a team effort involving staff at the Center for Human Resources at Brandeis University and Abt Associates Inc., as well as staff at the seventeen Learn and Serve programs in the evaluation and the Corporation for National Service. We would like to take this opportunity to express our thanks to all who contributed.

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Sierra Ridge Middle School
Pollock Pines, CA

Hillside High School
Upland, CA

Vista High School
Bakersfield, CA

Wakulla Middle School
Crawfordville, FL

Coral Park High School
Miami, FL

Taos High School
Taos, NM

Futures Academy
Buffalo, NY

Nathaniel Rochester Middle School
Rochester, NY

Hempstead High School
Hempstead, NY

Scotia-Glenville High School
Scotia, NY

McDowell High School
Marion, NC

North Olmsted High School
North Olmsted, OH

East Scranton Intermediate School
East Scranton, PA

Wanamaker Middle School
Philadelphia, PA

Nocona Jr. High School
Nocona, TX

Caprock High School
Amarillo, TX

Menasha High School
Menasha, WI

Summary Report

National Evaluation of Learn and Serve America

Center for Human Resources

Brandeis University

Participant Impacts at the End of the Program Year

The Learn and Serve programs in the study had a positive short-term impact on participants' civic attitudes and involvement in volunteer service at the end of the program year.

The Learn and Serve programs also had a positive impact on participants' educational attitudes and school performance during program participation, though only on a few of the measures used in the study.

The service-learning programs in the study had no significant effects on measures of social and personal development for the participants as a whole. However, there were positive impacts on teenage parenting and arrests for middle school students.

Participants in the Learn and Serve programs gave the programs a strong, positive assessment. More than 90% of the program participants reported that they were satisfied with their service experience and that the service they performed was helpful to the community.

Participant Impacts One Year Later

The Learn and Serve programs showed little evidence of longer-term impacts. One year after the end of the initial program experience, most of the short-term impacts had disappeared.

In general, students from the high school programs showed a stronger pattern of longer-term impacts than students from the middle schools.

Participants who continued their involvement in organized service activities during the follow-up year showed significantly stronger impacts one year later than those of students who reported no organized service involvement in the year following program participation.

The most puzzling finding in the long-term follow-up is a negative impact on English grades for program participants – the only negative impact found in the study. One possible explanation is that while engagement in service may prompt students to work harder in classes where they normally struggle (e.g. math or science), their involvement may also lead them to "coast" a little more in classes in which they are already doing well. In this instance, English grades for participants were higher at the beginning of the program than those of comparison group students and remained higher at follow-up despite the decline.

Differences in Impacts Among Subgroups

Impacts of service-learning were shared relatively equally by a wide range of youth (white and minority, male and female, educationally and economically disadvantaged, etc.). However, non-white and educationally disadvantaged participants did show significantly more positive impacts on academic performance than their complementary subgroup.

Services in the Community

Learn and Serve participants provided an impressive array of services to their communities. Altogether, students in the seventeen evaluation sites were involved in over 300 projects each semester, providing over 150,000 hours of service over the course of the year.

The services provided by Learn and Serve participants were highly rated by the agencies where students performed their work.

Integrating Service into Schools

The service-learning programs in the study were strongly supported by administrators and fellow teachers on average, and the large majority of programs appear likely to continue to operate after the end of their Learn and Serve grant.

However, few of the sites engaged in organized efforts to expand the use of service within the school or district. While there was widespread support for the concept of service-learning, few of the schools took formal steps to train or inform their teachers about service-learning.

Return on Investment

The dollar benefits of well-designed service-learning programs substantially outweigh the costs. On average, participants in the programs in the study produced services valued at nearly four times the program cost during the 1995-96 program year.

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Introduction

In 1993, the National and Community Service Trust Act (P.L. 103-82) established the Learn and Serve America School and Community-Based Programs to support school and community-based efforts to involve school-aged youth in community service. The Learn and Serve program is administered by the Corporation for National Service and funded through grants to states and national organizations, and through them to individual school districts, schools, and community organizations. In 1994-95, the first year of the program, the Corporation awarded approximately $30 million in grants supporting over 2,000 local efforts involving over 750,000 school-aged youth.

The Learn and Serve Evaluation

Between 1994 and 1997, Brandeis University's Center for Human Resources and Abt Associates Inc. conducted an evaluation of the national Learn and Serve School and Community-Based Programs for the Corporation for National Service. The Learn and Serve evaluation was designed to address four fundamental questions:

1. ***What is the impact of program participation on program participants?*** How have Learn and Serve programs affected the civic, educational, and social skills and attitudes of participating students?
2. ***What are the institutional impacts of Learn and Serve programs on participating schools?*** Did the Learn and Serve grants help to expand service-learning opportunities and promote the integration of service in participating schools?
3. ***What impacts do Learn and Serve programs have on their communities?*** Did they provide needed services to the community and help to increase collaboration between schools and community agencies?
4. ***What is the return (in dollar terms) on the Learn and Serve investment?***

The Evaluation Approach

To answer these questions, the evaluation examined Learn and Serve programs in seventeen middle schools and high schools across the country using a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods. These included analysis of survey data and school record information for approximately 1,000 Learn and Serve program participants and comparison group members; surveys of teachers at the seventeen schools; telephone interviews with staff at community agencies where students performed their service; and on-site interviews and observation of program activities. The major focus for the evaluation was the 1995-96 school year, with student and teacher follow-up surveys taking place in spring 1997.

All of the programs selected for the study:

- had been in operation for more than one year
- reported higher than average service hours
- reported regular use of written and oral reflection
- were school-based and linked to a formal course curriculum

Evaluating "Fully Implemented" Programs

In selecting sites for the study, the evaluation focused on a set of "fully implemented" service-learning programs – programs that were well-established and demonstrated the characteristics of a well-designed service-learning program.[1] All of the programs selected for the study had been in operation for more than one year when selected and reported higher than average service hours and regular use of written and oral reflection. All were school-based initiatives and linked to a formal course curriculum.

The goal in selecting these programs was to focus the evaluation on programs that represented a more intensive, higher quality service-learning experience than average so that we could identify the impacts that could reasonably be expected from mature, well-designed, school-based service-learning efforts. As such, it is important to recognize that the evaluation is not designed to address the average impact of *all* Learn and Serve programs. Rather, it reports on what might be considered the upper tier of Learn and Serve programs at the time. The results from those programs should be seen as representing the potential impact of service-learning as programs mature and implementation improves throughout the system.

The Organization of the Report

The remainder of the report summarizes the results of the evaluation. Chapter Two provides an overview of the programs in the evaluation. Chapters Three and Four then present data on the programs' impacts on participants, based on the analysis of survey and school record data. Chapter Five discusses the services provided by participants and provides an assessment based on surveys of staff at local service sites. Chapter Six examines the institutional impacts on participating schools, and Chapter Seven presents the findings on the dollar return on investment for the Learn and Serve programs in the study. Chapter Eight summarizes the evaluation's conclusions. Scattered throughout the report are descriptions of a number of the programs in the evaluation and quotations from program participants about their service experiences.

[1] The evaluation sites were selected through a structured sampling process from a pool of approximately 210 middle and high school service-learning programs in nine states that had been randomly selected and contacted as part of the site selection process. The nine states were: California, Florida, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin.

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The Program Experience in the Evaluation Sites

At the core of the Learn and Serve program is the idea of service-learning. As defined in the legislation, service-learning combines meaningful service in the community with a formal educational curriculum and structured time for participants to reflect on their service experience. Service-learning stands in contrast to traditional voluntarism or community service, which generally does not include reflection or links to any organized curriculum.

As noted in the Introduction, the Learn and Serve evaluation was focused on sites that met the basic set of criteria for high quality, fully-implemented service-learning. All of the sites involved students in higher than average service hours and all conducted regular reflection and writing. The programs were all school-based and linked to an academic curriculum. While the programs varied in structure and format, all offered a relatively intensive, hands-on involvement in service and an opportunity to "process" the service experience through formal and informal group discussions, journal writing, research papers, and group presentations. Some of the key elements of the program experience in the sites included the following:

- ***Students were involved in substantial hours of direct service.*** While the hours for individual programs varied widely, the average student in the evaluation sites provided over 70 hours of direct service. Most of that service was in educational or human services-related projects – working as a tutor or a teacher's aide, in a nursing home or homeless shelter.

- ***Service generally involved hands-on, face-to-face experiences with service recipients.*** The large majority of students (76%) had at least some direct contact with service recipients, meeting students or senior citizens face-to-face. For most students (60%), the service experience included a mix of individual service assignments and group projects.
- ***Service involved reflection.*** Seventy-six percent of the participants reported that their classes included time set aside to discuss their service experiences, and 44% reported keeping a journal. Many of the programs also used other forms of written reflection (essays, research papers, presentations) not captured by the survey questions.
- ***Service involved elements of a high quality service experience.*** More than 60% of the students reported that their service involved real responsibilities, a chance to do things themselves, a variety of tasks, opportunities for discussion and to develop and use their own ideas. Nearly 80% reported feeling that they had made a contribution.

A Variety of Program Strategies

The programs in the evaluation varied widely in their organization and structure, reflecting much of the broader diversity among Learn and Serve programs around the country:

- Ten of the programs were high school programs and seven served middle school students.
- Ten were integrated into academic classes; seven were structured as stand-alone, elective service-learning courses.
- Nine of the programs were part of a school-wide service or service-learning strategy.
- Four of the Learn and Serve programs were integrated into special programs for at-risk youth; three took place within alternative school settings.
- Eight of the programs took place in urban settings, five were primarily suburban, and four took place in rural areas.

At Scotia High School, 65 students took part in the Elder Key program which partnered students with 130 elderly residents in the community. Students made daily telephone calls to their partners and were trained in emergency procedures for those cases in which their partner failed to answer the phone. The program was credited with saving several lives over the course of the year when students notified authorities that their daily call had not been answered.

A Diverse Group of Participants

The students in the programs in the evaluation sites also represented a diverse group of young people in terms of age, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and prior experience with service-learning. The table below highlights the characteristics of participants in the evaluation sites.

Participant Characteristics in the Evaluation Sites

Characteristics	Percent
Gender	
Male	40%
Female	60%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	58%
Black/African American	17%
Hispanic	19%
Asian	2%
Native American	1%
Multicultural	3%
Other Characteristics	
Economically Disadvantaged	38%
Educationally Disadvantaged	30%
Involved in Self-Reported Delinquent Behavior During Past 6 Months (been in a fight, used a weapon, hurt someone, etc.)	29%
Involved in a Service-Learning Class in the Prior Year	45%

Note: Participant characteristics data is based on baseline survey and school record data for 608 participants in the evaluation's analysis sample.

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Selected Program Descriptions

The **SITES Program** at North Olmsted High School (Ohio) combined English, social studies, and service-learning into a single half-day block of classes. Students provided 4-5 hours of service every week at a variety of local schools and community agencies. Service was linked to the academic curriculum through the literature read in the English class and through research papers, group projects, and presentations on topics related to students' service sites.

In the **Social Issues Program** at Taos High School (New Mexico), students identified, studied, and addressed local issues through small group projects which ranged from training as drug education counselors for the elementary school to sponsorship of a student/police basketball game as part of an anti-violence campaign. Students wrote about and discussed their projects and their role in the community through weekly reflection exercises designed by the course instructors.

East Scranton Intermediate School (Pennsylvania) has a school-wide service philosophy and developed an interdisciplinary 8th grade class focused on service-learning. Their major service activity was focused on a local hospital, where students worked in a variety of departments. Students also worked together on a variety of small group projects tied to academic subjects. Students participated in service three out of every six afternoons, totalling more than 200 hours over the course of the school year.

At **Wakulla Middle School** (Florida), service-learning was integrated into the alternative education program for at-risk students. Every other week students in the at-risk program, along with high achieving students, worked for half a day with staff from the Park and Recreation Department to revitalize a neighborhood park. Students worked in small groups on tasks that reinforced social, behavioral skills, and academic skills. Each service session was followed by an organized group discussion. Teachers in the alternative education program then used the park experience over the year in illustrating lessons in the classroom.

The **GIVE Program** at Scotia High School (New York) was an elective service-learning course that operated on a quarterly basis throughout the school year. Students attended the GIVE class once each week and provided two or more hours of direct service every week. Service activities ranged from one-to-one support for elderly residents (students make daily calls to check on their elderly partner) to volunteer work at a range of local human service agencies. Reflection took place through the weekly class discussions and a weekly "reflection document" (similar to a journal) which was reviewed by the teacher and which students shared to spark discussions in class.

Short-Term Participant Impacts

The primary goal of the Learn and Serve program is to help young people develop as responsible citizens, improve their academic skills, and develop as individuals through involvement in meaningful service linked to structured learning activities. Because of this, three basic questions guided the participant impact evaluation:

1 ***What was the impact of service-learning on participants' civic development?*** Did service-learning help to build students' understanding of their communities, their sense of social responsibility, and their commitment to community involvement?

2 ***What was the impact on educational development and academic performance?*** Did service-learning increase students' engagement in school, school attendance, and/or academic performance?

3 ***What was the impact of service-learning on students' personal and social development?*** Did service-learning help strengthen students' life skills (such as communications skills, work orientation, and career awareness), and did it lead to a reduction in involvement in risk behaviors?

To address these questions, the evaluation examined participant impacts at two points in time. First, the evaluation examined participant impacts at the end of the 1995-96 program year to identify short-term, "post-program" impacts – those impacts that were evident immediately following program participation. The evaluation then conducted a follow-up study in the spring of 1997 to examine the longer-term impacts of program participation. In both cases, the assessment of participant impacts was based on a combination of participant surveys (at the beginning and end of program participation and one year later) and data drawn from school records. Finally, the evaluation team also collected information on participants' responses to their service experiences through the surveys and through interviews conducted with the students at the end of the 1995-96 program year.

Measuring Short-Term Participant Impacts

To measure the short-term, "post-program" impact of the Learn and Serve programs, the evaluation administered surveys and analyzed school records for approximately 1,000 students at the beginning and end of program participation in the seventeen evaluation sites. Approximately 70% of the students were high school-aged and 30% were middle school students.[2]

The surveys and school records used in the study incorporated over 20 different outcome measures, including measures of civic and social attitudes, involvement in volunteer activity, educational attitudes and performance, and measures of involvement in risk behaviors. The measures reported in the study are listed in the table on the following page.

The impacts from the programs were estimated by comparing the average outcomes for program participants with those of comparison group members after making adjustments through a regression formula for differences in both baseline scores and the baseline characteristics of the two groups. The program's "impact" is the degree to which the outcomes for participants were significantly better (or worse) than those of students in the comparision group.

[2] The analysis sample included 608 program participants and 444 comparison group members. 733 were high school students and 319 were in middle school programs.

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At Taos High School, students in the service-learning course helped to organize a local "Peace Day" as part of their ongoing school and community violence prevention efforts. Over 1200 local elementary students received conflict resolution training as part of the event, which was described as "the most effective model I've seen in terms of working with youth" by one community representative.

Outcome Measures Used in the Evaluation

Civic/Social Attitudes

- Personal and Social Responsibility
- Acceptance of Cultural Diversity
- Service Leadership
- Civic Attitudes-Combined Scale (Combined scores from Personal and Social Responsibility, Cultural Diversity, and Service Leadership)

Volunteer Behavior

- Involvement in any Volunteer Activity in Past 6 Months
- Estimated Hours of Volunteer Service in Past 6 Months

Educational Impacts

- Educational Competence
- School Engagement
- Individual Course Grades (English,Social Studies, Math, Science)
- Core Grade Point Average (combined English, Social Studies, Math and Science)
- Overall Grade Point Average (including electives, other courses)
- Failed 1 or More Courses
- Days Absent
- Suspensions
- Educational Aspirations (Wants to Graduate from a 4 Year College)
- Homework Hours (3 or More Hours per Week)

Social Development

- Communications Skills
- Work Orientation

Involvement in Risk Behaviors

- Consumed any Alcohol in Past 30 Days
- Used Illegal Drugs in Past 30 Days
- Arrested in Past 6 Months
- Ever Pregnant or Made Someone Pregnant
- Fought, Hurt Someone, or Used Weapon in Last 6 Months

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Short-Term Impacts on Participants

The evaluation examined four broad groups of impacts: civic/social attitudes, volunteer behavior, educational attitudes and performance, and social development and involvement in risk behaviors.

Impacts on Civic/Social Attitudes

Based on the data from 1995-96 school year, the Learn and Serve programs in the study had a positive impact on the civic attitudes of program participants. Students in the programs showed positive, statistically significant impacts on three of four measures of civic development: acceptance of cultural diversity, service leadership, and the overall measure of civic attitudes (which combined diversity, leadership, and personal and social responsibility). Only the personal and social responsibility scale failed to show a significant impact.

The impacts on civic/social attitudes were most evident among the high school students in the study. Participants in high school service-learning programs showed significant impacts on service leadership and the combined civic attitudes scale and a marginally significant impact on attitudes towards diversity. Middle school students, in contrast, showed some gains in the measures of civic attitudes, but none were statistically significant.

While the Learn and Serve programs had a positive impact on civic attitudes, the impacts were generally small, showing less than a 5% difference between participant and comparison group scores. In part, the relatively small size of the impacts reflects the fact that most young people began with a fairly well-developed sense of civic responsibility. In that regard, service-learning programs might best be understood as strengthening or reinforcing students' generally positive civic attitudes rather than building a positive set of attitudes from scratch.

The largest impact on civic attitudes was on the measure of service leadership – the most direct measure of student attitudes towards service itself. The questions in that measure focused less on general attitudes and more on the degree to which students felt they were aware of needs in the community, believed that they could make a difference, knew how to design and implement a service project, and were committed to service now and later in life. In that instance, the service experience had a very clear and positive effect, providing a boost in students' understanding of the service task and their confidence in their ability to continue it.

Understanding Citizenship

"Before I got involved in community service, I always thought of being a good citizen as something like raking a neighbor's yard. Now I look at it more as actually touching people's lives and communicating with all the people of the community. Not just a certain group – the doctors and the lawyers and the neighbors, but everybody that's in the community."

"It makes us better citizens. A good citizen to me is someone who puts back into the community."

Respecting Others

"I work in a group home for mentally handicapped people. And, since I've been doing it, I've gained a lot of knowledge about how they live, how they do things, what their life is like. It really helps me to understand what they go through. People think being handicapped is the end of the world. But it's really not. They learn to deal with it just like anything else you learn to deal with in your life."

Impacts on Volunteer Behavior

The Learn and Serve programs also had a significant positive impact on involvement in volunteer service for all the program participants. Program participants were significantly more likely to have been involved in some form of volunteer service and to have contributed more hours of service during program participation than students not enrolled in the program. Overall, participants were nearly 20% more likely to have been involved in some form of service activity during the previous six months than comparison group students. They also provided more than twice as many hours of service as comparison group members during that time period (an average of 73 hours of service versus 32 hours for comparison group members).

Both high school and middle school students showed gains in their involvement in service activities, but high school students were more likely to show an impact on service hours. Overall, high school participants provided more than three times more volunteer hours than comparison group members (78 hours vs. 25 hours). Middle school participants also showed greater hours of service, but the difference was not statistically significant.

It is not surprising that participants in a service-learning program should have more volunteer hours than non-participants – that is an essential part of the program. But the comparison between participants and non-participants shows that those hours represent a net gain and that service-learning programs are not simply diverting students from volunteer service that they would otherwise normally be doing. As such, the programs are adding to the overall volunteer experience of young people: involving more young people in service and in a more intensive service experience than would take place in the absence of the service-learning program.

Summary of Post-Program Participant Impacts

Characteristic	All Participants	High School Participants	Middle School Participants
Civic/Social Attitudes			
Acceptance of Cultural Diversity	✔	✔*	
Service Leadership	✔	✔	
Civic Attitudes-Combined Scale	✔	✔	
Volunteer Behavior			
Volunteered for a Community Organization or Got Involved in Other Community Service in Past 6 Months	✔	✔	✔
Average Hours Doing Volunteer Work or Community Service in Past 6 Months	✔	✔	
Educational Impacts			
School Engagement	✔	✔	
Math Grades	✔	✔	
Social Studies Grades			✔
Science Grades	✔*	✔*	
Core Grade Point Average	✔*		
Fail 1 or More Courses		✔	
Social Development/Involvement in Risk Behavior			
Arrested in Last 6 Months			✔
Ever Pregnant or Made Someone Pregnant	✔*		✔*

Note: ✔ indicates a positive, statistically significant impact (significant at the .05 or .01 level)
– indicates a negative impact
✔* indicates a positive impact that is marginally significant (i.e., significant at the .10 level)

Source: Survey and school record data for a sample of 608 program participants and 444 comparison group members in the seventeen evaluation sites.

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Thinking About Careers

"I've really been looking for what I want to do, the direction I want to go. I think now, I really want to do something around helping somebody – human services, the medical field, or something like that where I'm going to be working with somebody, helping them make a difference in their lives."

"Neither of my sites had anything to do with what I wanted to become. But I learned there were other options open to me, that I liked working with the elderly and I like working with kids too. So, I have a broader range of things to look at now."

Impacts on Educational Attitudes and Performance

The Learn and Serve programs had positive short-term effects on participants' educational attitudes and school performance, though only on a few of the measures examined in the study. For the participant group as a whole, the Learn and Serve programs produced positive, statistically significant impacts on two measures – school engagement and math grades. They also produced marginally significant impacts for science grades and core grade point average (English, math, science, social studies grades combined). There were no impacts on English and social studies grades, or on measures of course failure, absenteeism, homework hours, or educational aspirations.

As with most of the other measures, high school students showed a slightly broader pattern of significant impacts than middle school students, with positive impacts on school engagement, math grades and course failures as well as a marginally significant impact on science grades. Middle school students showed positive increases in social studies, math, and science grades and core GPA. But the social studies increase was the only one that was statistically significant.

The limited nature of the educational impacts makes it difficult to conclude that service-learning is having a strong positive impact on students' educational experience. Where gains are evident, they are generally incremental in nature – a 10% increase in math grades, a 6.5% increase in science, and a 4% increase in core GPA. The change in math grades, for example, represents a increase from a solid C to a C+ (i.e. from a 2.26 average to 2.48). Clearly, for the participants in this study, involvement in service-learning did not promote a substantial change in overall school performance during the course of a single year.

At the same time, the fact that there are impacts on multiple measures (school engagement, course grades, core GPA) does suggest that service-learning is having some positive influence on school performance. The most likely explanation is that service-learning is helping students to become more engaged in school and that, perhaps as a result, they are doing better in at least some of their classes.

Gaining Confidence and Maturity

"I think I've matured so much this year, just through [the program]. We are actually out in the work world, and we have to deal with people every day. Not just students or kids our age or younger. We have to deal with adults – we have to be mature, show responsibility, and act like we know what we are doing."

"Pretty much everybody in the class is in charge of an activity at one time or another. So, you learn if you are capable of pulling off something like that. You learn a lot about yourself and the skills that you have, your strengths and weaknesses."

Social and Personal Development

The one area in which there were no statistically significant post-program impacts for participants as a whole was on the measures of personal and social development, which included measures of perceived communications skills, work orientation, and involvement in risk behaviors. The only impact evident for the whole group was a marginally significant impact on teenage pregnancy.

For middle school students, however, there was some evidence of impact on involvement in risk behaviors, with a substantial, statistically significant impact on arrests and a marginally significant impact on teenage parenting. The fact that there are impacts on two risk measures for middle school students suggests that for these younger students, involvement in a well-organized service-learning program may play a role in reducing some kinds of risk behaviors.

More broadly, the impacts on middle school students and the marginal impact on teenage parenting for participants as a whole suggest that service-learning may have a role to play in more comprehensive interventions. A growing number of programs for at-risk youth have incorporated community service or service-learning into their overall design, and evaluations of several of those programs have shown a significant reduction in risk behaviors. While service alone is not likely to dramatically reduce involvement in risk behaviors, the data here suggest that it may have a role to play in a variety of other program strategies.

Differences in Impacts Among Subgroups

In general, the impacts from the Learn and Serve programs were evenly distributed across all the subgroups in the study. Males and females, white and minority students, economically and educationally disadvantaged students, students involved in one or more risk behaviors at baseline, and students with and without prior volunteer experience or participation in prior service-learning programs all showed similar patterns of impact. No one group seems to be consistently more likely to benefit from service than another.

While there were no across-the-board differences in impacts between subgroups, some differences did stand out. Minority (non-white) students showed significantly stronger impacts on measures of academic performance than did white students. Young women also showed stronger impacts on several education-related measures. These differences suggest that some groups may benefit on some impacts more than others. However, the broader finding is that the benefits of service-learning appear to cut across all groups of young people in the study.

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Making A Difference

"One day, [one of the nursing home residents] was just sitting there, hiding his hands like this. And he was just crying. And I just looked at him and I thought: What if this was my grandpa? What if this was my husband? My dad? So, I went to him and I took his hand and I said, "Jim, I can't understand what you are feeling, but can you tell me anyway? Can we talk about it? Can I just listen?" And, he said, "no, no, no." And, I said, "Come on Jim, please! I want to know." So, I took him to the back of the room, and I sat there with him the whole time I was there, and I just held his hand, mostly. He just talked. And ever since that day, as soon as I get there, he's got a smile. He tells me all these stories. He talks. And, I think that's my biggest accomplishment there, because he has not cried since that day."

Participant Perspectives

Finally, when asked directly about their service experience, most participants gave it high marks. In surveys and interviews, students reported that the Learn and Serve programs helped provide them with an increased understanding of their communities, their academic work, and themselves.

- More than 95% of the program participants reported that they were satisfied with their community service experience and that the service they performed was helpful to the community and the individuals they served.
- 87% of the participants believed that they learned a skill that will be useful in the future, and 75% said that they learned more than in a typical class.
- 75% reported developing "a really good personal relationship" through their service experience, most commonly with another student or a service beneficiary.
- Over 90% felt that students should be encouraged to participate in community service (though only 36% felt that it should be required).
- Approximately 40% of the participants also reported that the service experience helped them think about and/or learn more about a future career or job.

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Participant Impacts One Year Later

One of the major questions for the evaluation is what kinds of longer-term impacts we can expect on participants from these types of service-learning programs. To what extent do impacts on civic attitudes and behavior or on educational performance persist in the year after program participation? Do those longer-term impacts differ among young people who continue their participation in service and those that do not?

To address those issues, the evaluation team conducted a one-year follow-up study at the end of the 1996-97 school year, surveying program participants and comparison group members one year after their initial program participation and analyzing school records for those individuals who were still in school. Altogether, the evaluation collected follow-up information on 764 participants and comparison group members, representing 72% of the original sample.[3]

Impacts on Program Participants at Follow-Up

A year after the end of the initial program experience, most of the impacts found at the end of the program had disappeared. For the participant group as a whole, the follow-up study found marginally significant positive impacts on only three measures: service leadership, school engagement, and science grades. Program participants did continue to provide more hours of volunteer service than comparison group members, but the difference between the two groups was much smaller (1.5 times as many hours vs. 2.3 times at post-program) and not statistically significant. To the extent that significant impacts were found, they continued to be small: the difference between participants and comparison group members on the measures of service leadership and school engagement were less than 3%; the difference on science grades is more substantial (approximately 11%), reflecting a shift from a C to a C+ in that one subject.

High School and Middle School Differences

As was the case with the post-program results, students from the high school programs were more likely to show impacts than the students from the middle schools. High school students showed positive, statistically significant impacts on service leadership and science grades, and marginally significant impacts on school engagement and hours of volunteer service. High school students continued to provide roughly twice as many hours of volunteer service as comparison group members during the follow-up period, and the difference in science grades was substantial – about 15%. For the middle school students, the only impact that persisted was the impact on arrests during the previous semester, which was only marginally significant at follow-up.

[3] The follow-up data included surveys from 764 participants and comparison group members (460 participants and 304 comparison group members). 508 (66%) of the students in the follow-up sample were from high school programs; 256 (34%) were from middle schools. The evaluation also collected school record data on 596 students (380 high school and 216 middle school students).

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Making A Difference

"You see a big, big change in the kids you work with. I had a girl who could hardly read, and I worked with her every week, and at the end of the year she was above the other students in her class. She was almost a grade ahead in her reading level. She just needed the extra attention."

Impact on English Grades

The most striking and puzzling finding for the follow-up analysis was a negative impact on English grades that was statistically significant for the participant group as a whole and for the participants in the high school programs. (Middle school participants also experienced a drop in English grades, but it was not statistically significant.) The finding is particularly puzzling because for the high school participants and the participant group as a whole, English grades were the only grades to show a substantial decline between baseline and follow-up. It is worth noting that English grades for participants in the follow-up were substantially higher than those for comparison group members at baseline, and while they declined in relative terms, they remained higher than the comparison group grades at follow-up despite the drop.

There are several possible interpretations for this particular result. The first is that it is a statistical artifact – evidence of the fact that, given enough sets of calculations, some results will be statistically significant solely by chance. Given that there are no other statistically significant negative findings in the study, this is a possibility worth considering.

The alternative is to recognize that while students involved in service may become more engaged in school and, as a result do better in those classes in which they normally struggle (e.g. math or science), their involvement in service may lead them to "coast" a little more in those courses in which they are already doing well. For those students, the other benefits of service – in terms of their sense of civic involvement, their increased sense of self-worth, or the opportunity to explore career options – may be worth a one half grade decline in one of their courses. The idea that service may distract students from their schooling has always been a concern for critics of the service-learning movement. However, the fact that the decline in English grades is accompanied by a positive impact on science grades and school engagement suggests that it should not be seen as evidence that involvement in service has a negative impact on school performance. Rather, the results from the post-program and follow-up analysis suggest that, on the whole, service-learning is likely to provide a small benefit or, at worst, have little positive or negative impact at all.

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At Wakulla Middle School, a mix of high achieving and at-risk students worked together and with Parks and Recreation Department staff to renovate a community park. Students helped to landscape the park, build picnic tables, and construct a gazebo, with four teams of students (about 25 students per team) working for half a day at the project every other week

Summary of Participant Impacts at Follow-Up

Outcome	All Participants	High School Participants	Middle School Participants
Service Leadership	✔*	✔	
Average Hours Doing Volunteer Work or Community Service in Last 6 Months		✔*	
School Engagement	✔*	✔*	
English Grades	–	–	
Science Grades	✔*	✔	
Arrested in the Last 6 Months			✔*

Note: ✔ indicates positive, statistically significant impact (significant at the .05 or .01 level)
– indicates a negative impact
✔* indicates an impact that is marginally significant (i.e., significant at the .10 level)

Repeaters and Non-Repeaters

As part of the follow-up study, the evaluation also looked at the differences in impacts between participants who had continued their involvement in organized service during the follow-up year ("repeaters") and those who did not ("non-repeaters"). Were students who continue their involvement in service more likely to show positive impacts one year after their initial participation? Conversely, to what extent is a one-time involvement in a service program likely to show longer-term effects?

While the impacts at follow-up were limited across the board, participants who continued to be involved in organized service programs were more likely to show evidence of longer-term impacts. Students who continued to be involved in organized service showed positive, statistically significantly impacts on three outcomes – service leadership, hours of volunteer service, and school engagement – as well as marginally significant impacts on involvement in volunteer service, college aspirations, and consumption of alcohol. The repeater group also showed the same statistically significant decline in English grades as did the participant population as a whole. The only impact among the non-repeaters was a marginally significant positive impact on science grades.

While these findings are suggestive, a number of questions remain. We know very little about students' program experience during the follow-up year or why a student continued in service-learning or not. As such, we need to be cautious in interpreting the results. But the data do suggest that students who continue their involvement in service are more likely to show significantly greater gains from their service experience. Conversely, the follow-up findings also suggest that short-term, one-time involvement in service-learning is unlikely to produce strong, lasting effects. The implication, at least at this point in time, is that service-learning needs to take place on an ongoing basis if it is to lead to longer-term impacts on participating youth.

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Applying Learning

"My service mini-course is Buffalo General Hospital Health careers. We go on a lot of field trips to the hospital. And, when you come back, you understand science more – how simple machines work in hospitals and what they have to do to save people's lives. You come back and you understand more about science."

"I think it's a big difference if you say you learned it hands-on, compared to if you say, "Well I read a book and I learned." We learn about stuff in [class] and then we apply it at our site. And I enjoy learning that way more then I do just sitting in classrooms all day."

Participant Impacts at Follow-Up for Repeaters and Non-Repeaters

Outcome	All Participants	Repeaters	Non-Repeaters
Service Leadership	✔*	✔	
Volunteered for a Community Organization or Got Involved in Other Community Service in Last 6 Months		✔*	
Average Hours Doing Volunteer Work or Community Service in Last 6 Months		✔	
School Engagement	✔*	✔	
English Grades	–	–	
Science Grades	✔*		✔*
Want to Graduate 4-Year College or Beyond		✔*	
Consumed Any Alcohol in Last 30 Days		✔*	

Note: ✔ indicates positive, statistically significant impact (significant at the .05 or .01 level)
– indicates a negative impact
✔* indicates an impact that is marginally significant (i.e., significant at the .10 level)

Impacts on Non-White and Educationally Disadvantaged Students

Finally, there were some substantial differences in impacts between several of the subgroups in the study at follow-up. For non-white and educationally disadvantaged participants, participation in service-learning appeared to provide significantly more positive impacts on measures of academic performance (i.e., grades and course failures) than for their complementary subgroup (that is, white students and non-educationally disadvantaged students). For the educationally disadvantaged students, at least, these findings suggest that service-learning may be a particularly effective strategy for students who are not otherwise likely to do well in school. More generally, they indicate that, while the academic impacts of service-learning may be limited for the population as a whole, some groups of students are likely to gain a more substantial academic boost from involvement in service-learning than others.

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Service in the Community

The primary goal of Learn and Serve is to help young people develop through involvement in service-learning. But, Learn and Serve was also intended to deliver needed services to the community – to "meet the unmet human, educational, environmental, and public safety needs of the United States."

According to telephone interviews with over 150 local agencies, the Learn and Serve programs in the study provided an impressive array of services to their communities. Altogether, community agencies in the seventeen study sites estimated that over 1,000 Learn and Serve students were involved in over 300 distinct projects or activities each semester, providing approximately 154,000 hours of service during the year. Based on the interview data from the host agencies, the average student provided over sixty hours of service each semester.

The service activities conducted by the students included a wide range of activities. Approximately 90% of the projects were in education and human services and included tutoring, serving as teachers' aides, working at nursing homes and adult day care centers. Environmental projects (recycling, neighborhood improvement efforts) and public safety projects made up the balance.

Assessments of Service Quality

According to the schools and community agencies where students provided assistance, the work of the Learn and Serve programs was highly rated:

- 99.5% of the agencies rated their overall experience with the local Learn and Serve program as "good" or "excellent."
- 97% indicated that they would pay at least minimum wage for the work being done.
- 96% reported that they would use participants from the program again.

Overall, agencies rated the quality of the work performed by the students as an 8.6 on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 as "unacceptable" and 10 as "best possible."

At East Scranton Intermediate School, 8th grade students worked at the local hospital two to three afternoons each week, where they were assigned individually or in small groups to departments throughout the hospital. Students read to children in the pediatric wards, helped staff the main desk and switchboard, delivered meals, and provided clerical support. The program began in 1993-94 and has expanded each year since.

Impact on Agencies and Communities

The work performed by the Learn and Serve participants also made a difference according to the community agencies where students served, both to the agencies and the service recipients:

- 90% of the agencies indicated that the Learn and Serve participants had helped the agency improve their services to clients and the community.
- 68% said that the use of Learn and Serve participants had increased the agency's capacity to take on new projects.
- 66% reported that participation in Learn and Serve had increased the agency's interest in using student volunteers.
- 82% reported that the Learn and Serve program had helped to build a more positive attitude towards youth in the community.
- 66% said that Learn and Serve had fostered a more positive attitude towards working with the public schools.
- 56% said that participating in the program had produced new relationships with public schools.

Agencies also reported direct benefits to their clients: 75% of the agencies where students provided education-related services (tutoring, student aides, etc.) reported that the students had helped to raise the skill levels, engagement, and self-esteem of the young people being assisted. Among programs serving elderly citizens or providing health-related services, nearly 65% of those interviewed reported that program participants helped improve the mood, morale, and quality of life of elderly residents, by providing companionship, social interaction, and personalized, one-to-one services.

Integrating Service-Learning into Schools

The third major goal for the national Learn and Serve program is to create new service-learning opportunities for school-aged youth and to do so through the integration of service-learning into the educational process. Learn and Serve grants in this regard can be seen as having two fundamental purposes: the development of permanent school- and community-based service-learning programs, and more broadly the integration of service-learning into academic curriculum and instruction on a larger scale.

Institutionalizing Service in the Schools

To a large degree, the Learn and Serve sites in the evaluation met their fundamental goal of establishing or expanding service-learning opportunities. In fifteen of the seventeen evaluation sites the service-learning programs were in operation through the follow-up year, and all fifteen appeared likely to continue beyond the end of the Learn and Serve grant.

At several of the evaluation sites, the Learn and Serve grants also prompted a significant expansion in service-learning:

- In one district, the original Learn and Serve grant for a high school service-learning coordinator led to a district-wide effort, including the hiring of a district-level coordinator and expansion of service-learning activities to all the district's schools.
- At a second site, the original high school Learn and Serve program doubled in size during the course of the grant and initiated a regular series of school-wide service activities organized by program participants. Under a new grant, the program's coordinators are working with interested teachers to integrate service-learning in ten additional courses in the high school and to establish service-learning programs at the district's middle and elementary schools as well.
- At two other high schools, the service-learning teachers have expanded service by adding a second service-learning class, and in a third community, the middle school service-learning coordinator has moved to the high school to help integrate service into the high school's program for youth at risk of dropping out.

Altogether, some degree of expansion was evident at nine of the seventeen evaluation sites. However, in most cases, expansion took place on an *ad hoc* basis rather than through any policy-level effort to integrate service-learning more broadly into the schools. As discussed below, relatively few of the schools engaged their teachers in organized efforts to expand and improve the quality of service-learning.

At Caprock High School, students worked an average of 4 hours per week at agencies throughout the community. In 1995-96, students provided clerical support at the Texas Employment Commission offices, distributed clothes and food at a day shelter, entertained and helped transport residents at a nursing home, read to and played with children at a rehabilitation hospital, and helped build exhibits and lead tours at the Amarillo Discovery Center, a local science museum.

Faculty Attitudes and Support for Service

Within the schools with Learn and Serve grants, support for service-learning was strong. Both at the beginning and end of the evaluation period, teachers reported generally positive attitudes towards service-learning and its potential role in education. Using the figures from the end of the evaluation (Spring, 1997):

- Over 90% of the teachers surveyed saw service-learning as a means of improving student attitudes towards school, increasing career awareness, improving student self-esteem, and increasing student social development and involvement in community affairs.
- Over 80% felt that service-learning was likely to increase academic achievement and provide increased exposure to social justice issues.
- 70% thought that service-learning would have a positive effect on student drug or alcohol abuse.
- Almost all the teachers (95%) believed that students should be encouraged to participate in community service, though only half believed that service should be required.

Efforts to Increase the Use of Service-Learning

While there was widespread support for the concept of service-learning, formal efforts to increase the use and quality of service-learning within the schools were limited. Though several of the sites in the study expanded service programs to additional students and schools, few of the schools took formal steps to train or inform their teachers about service-learning.

- When asked how they had heard about the Learn and Serve program in their schools, most teachers (77%) cited word of mouth from other teachers. Less than half learned about the program through a presentation at a faculty meeting and less than one third from a memo, newsletter or printed notice.
- As of Spring 1997, only 27% of the teachers in the evaluation sites reported having participated in training or professional development related to service-learning, and only 24% of those teachers reported participating in more than a one-day workshop. Altogether, less than 7% of the teachers surveyed had more than one day of training.

The degree to which professional development took place varied widely among different types of schools. Middle school teachers were substantially more likely to have participated in some form of professional development than their high school counterparts (35% vs. 24%), and teachers in school-wide programs were nearly three times more likely to have participated in some form of professional development than those in schools with more limited service-learning programs (47% vs. 17%). Clearly, professional development in support of service is more likely to take place where there is a school-wide commitment to service-learning.

In North Olmsted, students worked an average of 4-5 hours per week at over 30 community agencies and schools, working individually and in small groups. Student assignments included working as tutors and teachers' aides at elementary schools, and as aides at nursing homes and senior day care centers; helping to manage the city Food Bank; working with severely disabled children in special education programs; and volunteering at local hospitals.

Use of Service-Learning Among Teachers

The use of service-learning in the classroom also varied widely among different types of schools, with substantially greater use among middle school teachers and among teachers in the schools where there was a school-wide commitment to service.

Overall, 24% of the teachers responding to the survey in the evaluation sites reported that they were using service-learning in their own classrooms. Middle school teachers reported higher than average use of service-learning (36%) and were twice as likely to use service in their classrooms as their high school counterparts (18%). The use of service-learning was highest among teachers in sites with a school-wide service-learning commitment (41%) and nearly three times the rate in schools with a single service-learning course (15%). Again, where the goal is to encourage the widespread use of service, whole-school strategies appear much more likely to achieve that result.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Institutionalization

The experience of the seventeen sites highlights some of the difficulties involved in integrating service more broadly into the curriculum and instruction in the schools. For most of the schools, and particularly those in which service was focused on a single class or program, involvement in service-learning was concentrated among a small group of teachers. Relatively few of the sites had initiated formal, organized efforts to expand the use of service-learning in the school, and few teachers had received any formal training.

The lack of a broader impact and integration does not appear to be the result of active opposition to service-learning, but is more likely the result of a host of major and minor barriers to institutional change in the schools. Based on the interviews with teachers, program staff, and administrators, these barriers include:

- lack of funds and available time for professional development (often less than one day per quarter);
- competing professional development priorities;
- concerns about meeting new content standards and graduation requirements;
- lack of planning time for teachers;
- logistical problems and inflexible school schedules; and
- a continued emphasis on community service over service-learning.

Over the long run, the broader integration of service will likely depend on increased emphasis on and support for professional development as well as efforts to help schools address these more fundamental structural concerns.

Return on Investment

How do the impacts and services from Learn and Serve programs compare to the cost of operating the programs themselves? Are well-designed service-learning programs cost-effective? To the extent that a dollar value can be determined, what kind of return do these programs provide on the public investment?

While there are a number of challenges involved in estimating the costs and benefits of service-learning programs, it is clear that the benefits of well-designed service-learning programs like those in this study substantially outweigh program costs. On average, the participants in the service-learning programs in the evaluation produced services for the community valued at nearly four times the cost of the program. While the dollar value of gains in participant attitudes or gains in student performance cannot be calculated, they would likely add to the benefit side of the equation. The net result is a substantial return on the public investment.

Estimating the Learn and Serve Return on Investment

- The average program cost per participant in the evaluation sites was $149.12. The cost figure includes the Learn and Serve grant, matching funds, and estimates of the costs for national program administration, divided by the number of participants in the programs.
- The average estimated dollar value of the service provided by program participants was $8.76 per hour. The estimate is based on estimates by the host agencies of what they would have to pay someone to perform the same type of work at the same level of quality and productivity.
- The estimated average value of service per participant is $585.87 ($8.76 per hour times an average of 66.88 hours of service per participant).
- The estimated return on investment is 4 to 1 ($585.87 divided by $149.12). The return on the investment of federal funds (an average of $105.10 in Learn and Serve and national administration costs per participant), is even greater – approximately 5.6 to 1.

Conclusion

The Learn and Serve programs studied in this evaluation represent a select group of service-learning sites – programs that were chosen to represent the potential of well-designed, fully-implemented service learning initiatives. At the time of their selection, all of the programs in the evaluation had been in operation for more than a year and reported higher than average service hours and regular use of both oral and written reflection – all broadly accepted indicators of quality practice in service-learning. While each program had its own strengths and weaknesses, together they represent serious efforts to bring the ideals of service-learning and the federal community service legislation into practice.

Key Findings

The findings from three years of research show that well-designed service-learning initiatives are achieving many of the goals of the federal legislation.

- **Program participants showed positive short-term impacts on a range of civic and educational attitudes and behaviors,** including impacts on attitudes toward cultural diversity and service leadership; on involvement in volunteer activities; on attitudes towards school; and on school grades. For younger (middle school) participants, the service-learning programs also significantly reduced their involvement in several types of risk behaviors.
- **Participant assessments of their program experience were also very positive.** More than 95% of the program participants reported that they were satisfied with their experience and that the service they performed was helpful to the community. Through the surveys and interviews, participants made clear that their service experience had been meaningful and had helped them to gain an increased understanding of their community, their academic work, and themselves.
- **The results from the follow-up study indicated that many of these positive impacts did fade over time,** with only marginal impacts on service leadership, school engagement, and math grades evident one year later. There is, in short, little evidence that one-time participation in even a well-designed service-learning program is likely to produce substantial long-term benefits. However, the follow-up data also suggest that students who continue their involvement in organized service over time were significantly more likely to continue to experience the benefits of participation.
- **The Learn and Serve programs benefited their communities.** Learn and Serve programs provided an impressive array of services, and those services were highly rated by the agencies where students performed their work. Ninety-nine percent of the agencies surveyed rated their overall experience with Learn and Serve as "good" or "excellent," and 96% reported that they would work with participants from the program again.
- Based on estimates of the value of the service provided by the programs, **Learn and Serve participants provided nearly $4 in service for every $1 spent on the program.** Even without calculating the value of the program impacts on participants, the Learn and Serve programs in the study provide a substantial dollar return on the program investment.

- **The Learn and Serve programs were somewhat less effective as vehicles of large-scale educational change.** While most of the programs were apparently able to establish themselves as permanent, ongoing efforts within their schools, the expansion of service-learning within the schools and the integration of service-learning into the school curriculum was limited.

Taken together, these findings make a strong case for service-learning as a tool for the civic and educational development of middle and high school-aged young people. At a relatively low cost per participant, the programs in the study have helped to strengthen civic attitudes, volunteer behavior, and school performance while providing needed services to the community. In almost all of the sites, the programs have proven sufficiently compelling to garner the support of school administrators and teachers and have established an ongoing presence in their institutions. The programs in the evaluation suggest that Learn and Serve can meet its goals and have an impact on the attitudes and behavior of young people across the country.

Implications for Policy and Practice

There are a number of implications for both policy and practice in the evaluation's findings.

First, the results from this group of "well-designed" programs suggest that program quality does make a difference – that well-designed, fully-implemented programs are likely to have a significant impact on their participants and communities. To the extent possible, then, the Corporation for National Service and its grantees need to continue their emphasis on improving the quality of local service-learning programs, both through professional development and through continued work on developing and disseminating work on "best practices."

Second, the limited success of the Learn and Serve grants as vehicles for institutional change highlight the need to define a clearer set of goals and expectations for the integration of service into schools and curriculum. If the goal of Learn and Serve is to establish new service-learning opportunities, the programs in the evaluation largely accomplished that mission. However, if the goal is to support the broader integration of service-learning on a school or district-wide basis, the Corporation and its grantees need to look carefully at how Learn and Serve grants can best make that happen.

Third, the evaluation findings also suggest the need for continued research on the longer-term and cumulative impacts of service-learning. While the evaluation found clear short-term impacts from program participation, the findings from the follow-up study raise the question of how schools and communities can structure their programs to extend those impacts over a longer period of time. To answer those questions requires additional, longer-term research.

In the end, it is important to recognize that this study represents only one step toward improving our understanding of impacts and effective practices in service-learning. But, while many of the findings need to be confirmed by other studies, the findings presented here make a strong case for the effectiveness of well-designed service-learning programs. As such, it lays a solid foundation for future program and policy work aimed at strengthening and expanding current Learn and Serve programs.

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- The National Senior Service Corps, through which Americans fifty-five and older contribute their skills and experience.

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